

Electronic Aggression

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[Matthew Reynolds] The December special edition of the *Journal of Adolescent Health* is devoted to electronic aggression. Joining me to discuss this topic are two of the authors in this edition, Dr. Corinne Ferdon, of CDC's Division of Violence Prevention and Marci Hertz, of CDC's Division of Adolescent and School Health. I'm Matthew Reynolds. Dr. Ferdon, let me start with you. Can you tell us a little more about what the term "electronic aggression" means?

[Dr. Ferdon] Sure. Matthew, I mean as you know, electronic media today is more sophisticated than ever, and adolescents have more choices and tools before them than you and I did growing up. They have blogs, instant messaging, chat rooms, emails, you name it. So adolescents use this technology in a variety of ways and they can use it in positive ways, but they also can use it in negative ways, and that's what we're focusing on, is what we're calling electronic aggression. What we're using as an umbrella term, many other people refer to subcategories of electronic aggression, which would be cyberbullying, online harassment, and internet bullying.

So let me give you the long drawn out definition of electronic aggression we're using. Electronic aggression would be any type of harassment or bullying, and would include things such as teasing, telling lies, making fun of others, making rude or mean comments towards others, spreading rumors, or making threatening or aggressive comments. And all this aggression could occur through a variety of media, including email, chat rooms, instant messaging, on a website, or through text messaging. What we're doing is we're proposing this broad, umbrella term so that we can draw more attention to this type of aggression and the numerous ways in which it can occur.

[Matthew Reynolds] Why is CDC involved? Why is CDC, Miss Hertz I'll direct this question to you, devoting attention to this subject of "electronic aggression"?

[Ms. Hertz] CDC has been paying attention, of course, to all the press and media around this issue, but in addition, we were receiving calls from state and local education agencies, about this issue of electronic aggression and looking for some guidance, and we as a public health agency realized we didn't really have any good information or guidance to provide them. So we convened this expert panel and subsequent journal supplement to really examine if this was a really prevalent problem or not, and if so, what risk and protective factors are associated with it. We really need more information to understand this problem and to be able to offer guidance to folks about how to prevent it.

[Matthew Reynolds] Let me stay with you, Ms. Hertz. You've both pointed out that electronic aggression is an emerging public health problem. What have you found that suggests this is the case?

[Ms. Hertz] Well, part of the difficulty in getting an accurate picture of the problem Matthew, is that this really an emerging area of study and there's only, it's only been examined by a very few researchers. However, when we look across the few research studies that have been conducted, there are a couple of things that we do notice here.

First of all, we know at least one study by Janis Wolak and her colleagues indicates that the rates of electronic aggression, or internet harassment is the term they use, do appear to be increasing. The rates in 2000 when they measured it were around 6 percent, and it appears that now, in 2005, when they measured it, that rates were around 9 percent, which was actually an increase of 50 percent. So that is an important point to note.

And then the second thing we notice is that those who are experiencing or victimized by electronic aggression do wind up experiencing psychosocial problems as a result of their victimization. For example, they're more likely to get detention, to skip school, to be suspended, to have behavioral problems, and experience distress as a result of their victimization.

[Matthew Reynolds] Well, Dr. Ferdon, are you suggesting that adolescents' use of technology is all bad?

[Dr. Ferdon] Absolutely not Matthew. Like anything, there's both risk and benefits and technology is not an exception there. With our special issue of the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, we're focusing on one specific risk area of technology, and that being electronic aggression. We feel like there are many benefits for technology with adolescents. Adolescents can communicate with each other more, they can talk with people around the world that they may never meet in person, they may easily stay better connected to their families and peers, which may translate into a stronger sense of safety and connectedness, and perhaps most importantly, they can quickly and easily access new information to build their knowledge base.

[Matthew Reynolds] In your article, you note that the range of adolescents who are victims of electronic aggression is from 9 percent to 34 percent? Ms. Hertz, what do you attribute this wide range to?

[Ms. Hertz] Well, the wide range is really due to differences in how these different researchers decided to define electronic aggression. For example, some of them included the type of harassment or bullying that occurs via text message on cell phone and some of them didn't, and they also used some different timeframes. Some of them inquired over the past few months and some of them, for example, included over the past year. So, those factors really contribute to the wide range.

[Matthew Reynolds] So would it be correct to say, Dr. Ferdon, that studies have found as many as 34 percent of U.S. youth say they are victims, and as many as 21 percent say they commit electronic aggression? Those seem like a large numbers.

[Dr. Ferdon] And as we mentioned before, we're just beginning to scratch the surface and build the foundation for what we know about electronic aggression. So I would caution anyone from taking huge leaps from those numbers just yet.

What the studies do consistently suggest is that victims and adolescents who perpetrate, or commit, electronic aggression, are pretty much a minority of youth who use electronic media. For example, the work by Kirk Williams and Nancy Guerra demonstrates that adolescents who experience physical and verbal aggression face-to-face is much more common and frequent than adolescents who experience electronic aggression.

[Matthew Reynolds] As you look across studies, is there a key finding?

[Dr. Ferdon] Well, there's one finding that jumped out at both of us, and that being that media technology seems to be contributing to the development of a new group of adolescents, who under traditional circumstances aren't victimized by their peers. Michele Ybarra and her colleagues found that 64 percent of youth who are harassed on-line, so they were victims of electronic aggression, were not also bullied or harassed at school. So, this finding suggests that, for the majority of electronic aggression harassment victims, that their use of media technology created a new vulnerability that they did not typically experience at school or in their community.

[Matthew Reynolds] Do you think that the increased use of social networking internet sites, such as MySpace and Facebook, are contributing to this? Ms. Hertz?

[Ms. Hertz] You know this is a question that we hear quite frequently, and the results that we do have, the limited research to date, really shows that instant messaging is really the more prevalent medium used by adolescents to perpetrate electronic aggression. However, we do need more research to better explore how adolescents are using all of these different mediums.

[Matthew Reynolds] In your article, you point out that many states have recently passed laws requiring the inclusion of cyberbullying in school district harassment and prevention policies. I'm sure this is not an easy decision when many educators are finding new technology exciting. Do you have any suggestions for prevention strategies that schools should consider?

[Ms. Hertz] Yes we do. This was really one of the primary goals of convening the panel, and the main take-home message that we got from the panel and from the Journal, is that sole reliance on just one method is going to be insufficient. So while it might be helpful to have blocking software in place in school districts, it is not going to be

effective in of itself. So we really encourage schools to take advantage of a coordinated school health program, which is in place in many school districts across the country.

In addition, Nancy Willard in her article, really emphasizes the importance of schools partnering with parents, and how, as a collaborative team, they can take reasonable precautions like doing the same types of things schools are already doing around crisis response and preparedness, developing a plan to address electronic aggression, regularly evaluating needs and effectiveness of the plans and practices and policies associated with the plans, and updating the plans and policies and practices, as needed, on a frequent basis.

[Matthew Reynolds] Ms. Hertz mentioned parents. Dr. Ferdon, what role do they play in preventing electronic aggression?

[Dr. Ferdon] Well parents are the most influential people in adolescents' lives. And even though they spend a good portion of their day at school, parents have a critical role in recognizing electronic aggression and have an important role in preventing electronic aggression.

As Ms. Hertz mentioned, we really are encouraging parents to partner with schools, other youth service organizations, technology-related businesses, and policy and law makers to find solutions.

One article in our special issue by Jonathan King and his colleagues highlighted that a lot of parents aren't getting involved just yet. He mentioned that approximately 40 percent of adolescents say that their parents do not impose rules about internet use and are unaware of what they're doing on the internet. And adolescents, about a quarter of them, are also admitting that their parents would probably be concerned if they knew what their kid was doing on the internet. So these data really highlight that parents could be doing a little bit more to get involved.

[Matthew Reynolds] You mentioned that parents could be doing more. Do you have any tips for parents that can help them prevent electronic aggression?

[Dr. Ferdon] Well, I got three basic tips I think parents can do. Number one, parents need to talk with their kids. As one of our panelists at our expert panel, and she also wrote two of our articles, Michele Ybarra stated, the problem is that adults view the internet as a mechanism to find information. Young people view the internet as a place to go. So caregivers are encouraged to ask their child where they're going and who they're going with whenever they leave the house, and what we're suggesting is they should take the same approach with electronic media. They should talk with their kids about where they're going and who they're talking with and who they're going there with.

Our recommendation number two would be that parents should explore the internet themselves. They need to learn which sites their children are visiting and visit them themselves. By parents looking on the internet, they'll be able to better understand where their children are going and help understand both the benefits and the risks of the various sites their children are exploring.

The third tip I would give is that parents need to talk to others. They need to talk with other parents and caregivers who have dealt with similar situations and learn what strategies they have found that work. Parents also would be, I would also encourage parents to talk to their school and school district to have them conduct an educational class for parents about electronic media.

[Matthew Reynolds] Ms. Hertz, as we move forward to begin fill the scientific gaps in available prevention programs for electronic aggression, what should we be considering?

[Ms. Hertz] Well, I think one important thing to consider is a point that Dr. Huesmann raises in his article, that we have decades of research and theory on the negative impact of what we now view as "traditional" forms of media, that being radio and T.V. and movies, and that these decades of research really offer some important insights that can be applied here about how technology can heighten aggressive tendencies of behavior.

In addition, there's work by Kirk Williams and Nancy Guerra that highlight that moral approval of bullying and perceived school climate and peer support are significant contributing factors to the likelihood that an adolescent is going to perpetrate verbal, physical aggression, or electronic aggression. So there are lessons that could be applied to face-to-face bullying that might also be applied here, and there are things around critically analyzing the media that we've applied to traditional forms of media that may also be applicable here.

[Matthew Reynolds] Where can our listeners go for more information on electronic aggression?

[Ms. Hertz] The data that we cited here today can be found in the December 2007 special issue of the *Journal of Adolescent Health*. And to access a complete copy of this Journal, please visit [w-w-w-dot-c-d-c-dot-g-o-v-forward slash injury](http://www.cdc.gov).

[Matthew Reynolds] Ms. Hertz, Dr. Ferdon, thank you for taking the time to share this information with our listeners today.

[Ms. Hertz and Dr. Ferdon] Thank you, Matthew.

[Announcer] To access the most accurate and relevant health information that affects you, your family and your community, please visit www.cdc.gov.